

PAYBACK – TALES OVE LOVE, HATE AND REVENGE

By Steve Bassett

Chapter One

By noon on Saturday, October 19, 1946, the sun had plunged through the grime and gloom of the air over Newark, and the city was basking in shirtsleeve warmth. Pleasant, but it had no effect on the two guys who earlier that morning butchered the corpse of a Hitler-loving swine, then packaged the pieces for afternoon delivery.

Mike tooled his 1939 Hudson Terraplane Coupe on a purposely circuitous route on his way to the city dump. Except for a few furtive glances, Mike ignored Frank who sat silently beside him in the passenger seat. There was no ball-busting during this ride.

During a spasm of bloodlust Mike volunteered the Terraplane for today's mission. He loved his Terraplane, inherited, along with his job, from his traveling salesman father who died of a massive heart attack while hawking men's suspenders and sock garters. The car was cherry red and Mike hoped it would be that way when it was all over. The sliding steel box in the car's trunk made their job easier for now, but Mike knew the clean-up afterward would be disgusting.

"We're getting close so let's just keep it slow as we go," Frank said. "It's all arranged. The dump's rear gate will be unlocked so we can slide in and out without any trouble. It can't be over soon enough. My gut's been up in my throat for the past hour. I know this is the third time, but the first two were never like this."

"We knew what we were getting into," Mike said. "We agreed that payback was due."

Mike and Frank were a matched set. Frank topped out at five feet ten inches. Mike at no more than five feet nine. They were of average build but fit and athletic. There was not a hint of Hollywood good looks between them. They were totally nondescript except for one thing. They

wore their old army combat fatigues bearing the shoulder patch of the 42nd Rainbow Division that had liberated the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. The patch's red, gold and blue rainbow crescent was an eye catcher, made famous back in 1917 by good old Doug MacArthur.

The Terraplane glided to a stop at the city dump's seldom-used rear gate. Frank jumped out and as expected found the padlock chain hanging loose. Mike watched as Frank pushed both sides of the gate open to clear the way. He thanked God the gate was wide enough to allow the Terraplane through without any danger of picking up scratches to the car's four-layered enamel paint job.

"Straight ahead about a hundred yards and then turn around that heap of junk and other shit on the right," Frank said as his finger followed squirreled handwritten instructions on a scrap of yellow paper. "Then we can't miss it. It's straight ahead and huge. Should be going full blast. We'll have to work fast. There's only one weekend watchman, but there's no telling when he'll be coming this way."

The heat from the open blast furnace door could be felt when they pulled to a stop a safe twenty feet from the hard-working behemoth. They jumped out and went to the Hudson's rear as Mike unlocked the trunk. They had already snapped on rubber gloves. He then popped a latch that allowed a large steel box to slide along rails out of the trunk and extend over the bumper. The box contained three bloody parcels. The largest was wrapped in a canvas painter's drop cloth, the two others in white sheets. All were tightly bound with untraceable hemp rope.

"Okay, let's get going," Frank said.

With great effort Frank and Mike hoisted the large canvas-wrapped bundle out of the steel box and carried it to the furnace door at arm's-length to avoid the dripping blood. "Don't want to drop this son of a bitch and then have to pick him up again. Ready?"

“Let’s get on with it.”

Sweating profusely, they waddled awkwardly toward the incinerator trying to make sure that their fatigues remained gore-free. With the blood-soaked bundle held at equal length between them, they rocked back-and-forth twice in order to get momentum, then heaved it into the furnace. Their speed was hampered by the Chaplinesque way they handled their grisly cargo. Next Frank tossed the smallest blood-drenched bundle into the flames.

Frank and Mike stopped in their tracks when a deep voice roared, “What the hell is going on down there? Stay right there! Don’t you move! Else your asses are mine!”

They spotted a big black man hobbling towards them from about seventy-five yards away. They had been warned that a watchman could be a problem, and there he was coming their way.

“Let’s get the hell out of here. We’re finished, right?” Mike said.

“Nope, not yet,” Frank said. He grabbed the last oblong and blood-drenched bundle, tossed it toward the incinerator and headed for the door on the front passenger side. At the trunk, Mike almost puked when he saw the red lake rippling at the bottom of the steel cargo box. He pushed the box into the trunk, slammed it shut and headed to the driver’s seat. He turned the car toward the exit.

Once in his seat, Frank glanced to his right and spotted the watchman limping toward them still a good twenty-five yards away.

“Hold it mother-fuckers!” he shouted. “Ain’t no chance you getting away!”

Mike hit the gas pedal hard grinding the gravel into a plume of dust as the Hudson sped off. It took only a few seconds before they swerved to a sliding stop at the gate. Frank jumped out, opened it and once the car was out on the frontage road, he covered any trace that they had

gotten inside help. He carefully closed the gate, wrapped the chain in its customary place and clamped the padlock closed.

A frustrated Tom Candless could only stand and watch helplessly as the dust from the departing car caught the wind and eddied around him. It was the first time in his six months on the job that he had seen anybody while making his rounds. For a combat vet with a Purple Heart for a leg wound, it was a plum job.

His warning shouts were a bluff. Even at his top speed, he knew they would be long gone before he reached the incinerator. But they didn't know that.

With the city dump disappearing in the rearview mirror, Frank and Mike were breathing easier when a rousing rendition of *The Stars and Stripes Forever* wafted its way from nearby Rupert Stadium.

"Would you believe it, a fanfare from Johnny Sousa himself," Frank said.

"It's the Little Army-Navy game."

"Yeah, spoiled rich kids from two highfalutin military academies playing at being men," Frank said.

"Actually saw one of the games before the war, wore uniforms just like West Point and Annapolis."

"Hope they give *Bonnie Annie Laurie* a shot before we get out of here. It's my favorite."

Mike stayed well within the speed limit as he glided the Hudson past late arrivals hunting for parking spaces as close as possible to Rupert Stadium. *Careful now, can't afford any nicked bumper with all that blood swishing around back there. All we need is an honest cop nosing around.*

“There it is! They must have heard me,” an excited Frank said as they finally got past the heavy traffic and were heading downtown.

“What the hell you talking about?”

“Bonnie Annie Laurie!”

Several blocks from the stadium, the heavy brass music from two marching bands was still loud and distinct. Mike momentarily lost control, his right hand jumping from the gear-shift knob in shocked reaction to the rich and exuberant baritone notes coming from Frank.

*Her brow is like the snowdrift,
Her neck is like the swan,
Her face it is the fairest,
That ever the sun shone on.*

“Goddamn, you should have warned me, my nerves already had me twitching.”

“Mike, my boy, she’s just the woman for you. It eases even the thought of the hereafter,” Frank said with a smile affecting a deep Scottish brogue. “Did you know that the great Albert Parsons sang this lovely ditty in his Chicago death cell after the Haymarket Riots? A great man.”

*Her voice is low and sweet
And she's all the world to me;
And for bonnie Annie Laurie
I'd lay me down and die*

“The Haymarket Riots? Never figured you for a Bolshevik.”

“No Communist blood, but a lot of anarchist from my dad.”

“Your dad an anarchist, doesn’t figure. He’s got a neat little meat shipping business, and the contacts to make it work.”

“You’re not a fucking babe in the woods, Mike. He had to do a lot of head-busting for the gangster-controlled meatpackers to get the nod. I know you think it’s just me and him, so here’s

a couple of names for you. Tom Sioni and Gino Sambino. Two teamsters who don't exist but get paychecks from Beagan and Son every week."

Mike did not reply, focusing his attention on the traffic ahead.

"Nothing to say? Hope to hell you're not passing judgment," said Frank now agitated and defensive. "Can't tell me the wop-gangster s don't have a piece of your racket. They love fancy duds, the flashier the better."

"Relax, I'm not judging you, your dad, or anything else. How the fuck can I after our year with Mister Rache."

By the time they were on McCarter Highway both had lighted up and taken a few deep drags in futile attempts to ease the anxiety that had been building since the start of their bloody mission more than a year ago. But despite their involvement in three revenge-driven murders, they were still strangers.

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OTHER WORKS BY STEVE BASSETT:

Father Divine's Bikes, Book One of the Passaic River Trilogy – 2020 Book Excellence Award Finalist, Book in a Series; Solo Medal Winner New Apple Literary Award Ebook General Fiction; Finalist International Book Awards (American Book Fest) in Genre Fiction; and Finalist Best Book Awards (American Book Fest) in General Fiction.

A gangster war, three murders, a gun-toting paperboy, and the numbers racket punctuate the tragic story of two altar boys adrift in a world of poverty, crime and hopelessness.

Golden Ghetto: How the Americans and French Fell In and Out of Love During the Cold War. Non-fiction. Considering the suspicions, jealousies, bigotry, and crass opportunism inherent whenever one foreign power occupies another, award-winning journalist Steve Bassett's "Golden Ghetto: How the Americans and French Fell In and Out of Love During the Cold War" pieces together an improbable love affair that ended in betrayal by French President Charles de Gaulle. It is a Cold War tale of birth, growth and death of a huge U.S. Air Force base as relived through the heretofore dormant memories and voices of both the occupier and the occupied. Tens of thousands of American GIs passed through Dèols-Châteauroux Air Station during the sixteen years that it was the largest U.S. Air Force supply base in Europe.

